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# U.S.-Soviet Naval Meeting Canceled

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An annual meeting of Soviet and U.S. naval officers to discuss dangerous incidents at sea was called off by Moscow after the Defense Department canceled related social events in reprisal for the fatal shooting of a U.S. Army major in March by a Soviet sentry in East Germany.

Moscow's boycott is the first by either superpower in 14 years of the meetings, which the Navy considers among the most effective forums for reducing U.S.-Soviet military tensions.

Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, who had earlier urged strong U.S. reprisals for the March killing of Maj. Arthur D. Nicholson Jr., decided to cut out the traditional protocol—or social—elements of the gathering without first notifying Secretary of State George P. Shultz or national security affairs adviser Robert C. McFarlane, according to Reagan administration officials.

State Department and White House officials strenuously opposed the move after learning of it, but failed to reverse Weinberger's decision, officials said.

"There was concern because this exchange is seen as a very practical forum for risk reduction," said one official.

Sen. John W. Warner (R-Va.), who helped initiate the talks in 1972 while he was Navy secretary, said he unsuccessfully pleaded with Weinberger not to alter the agenda after learning of his plans from opponents within the government.

"These meetings should not be linked to the problems that we periodically experience with the Soviets in other areas," Warner said. "It's imperative we have these talks for the safety of our sailors."

The cancellation was reported by The New York Times yesterday.

Pentagon officials said Moscow

called off the meeting June 7, two days before the Soviet naval delegation was scheduled to arrive here for a week-long visit that originally was to include four days of talks and three of social events.

The Soviet note cited changes in the original agenda as the reason for boycotting the meeting, according to a senior defense official.

About a week before the meeting, American Navy officers informed their Soviet counterparts that the visit would be stripped of its social content and limited to the time needed for "substantive" discussions, officials said.

"In view of the murder of Maj. Nicholson by a Soviet soldier and their failure to apologize or even compensate the family for this tragedy, we did not think this was an appropriate time to include a larger social program in addition to the substantive talks," the Pentagon

said in a prepared statement. The statement said both governments agree to "seek a mutually convenient date in the future when the talks can be held under appropriate circumstances."

Annual talks began in 1972 after the signing of the Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents on and Over the High Seas, designed to defuse tensions between Soviet and U.S. naval units engaged in intelligence-gathering and harassment.

Alternating between Moscow and Washington, the meetings have brought together opposing naval officers whose efforts to establish "rules of conduct" on the high seas have been credited for reducing collisions and near collisions.

Traditionally, the visiting delegation is treated to formal dinners and city tours following the business meeting.

The meetings have proceeded

despite past crises in Soviet-American relations, including the Soviet downing of a South Korean airliner in 1983 and the U.S. bombing of Haiphong Harbor in 1972.

Adm. James D. Watkins, chief of naval operations, at a naval strategy conference in Newport, R.I., yesterday predicted that the conference will be rescheduled soon.

Watkins, who said the incidents at sea between American and Soviet ships dropped to their lowest level last year, added that the agreement is "very valuable . . . . It's very important that we have the opportunity for dialogue where mariners can talk to mariners. If they're nasty, we tell them they're nasty. They like to be told they're nasty."

*Staff writers George C. Wilson and Walter Pincus contributed to this report.*